

"Oppression"

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[0 : 0 0] Well, good morning, church. It's good to see you all this morning. If this is your first time to Trinity, let me welcome you. Today we have the joy and the privilege of celebrating baptism.

That's what this big tank is up here on the stage. In a little bit, Josue and Zerion are going to share their stories of coming to faith in Christ, and they're going to be baptized. Now, baptism is an outward act that symbolizes a believer's union with Jesus Christ through faith and the brand new life that they have by God's grace.

And baptism is also a public act that says, I've committed to live as a follower of the Lord Jesus and as a member of His body, the church. Now, if you're new to Christianity, you might be wondering, what is this all about?

Maybe your previous experience with Christianity has just seemed like a lot of restrictive rules or maybe just a bunch of empty religious ceremonies.

But maybe it hasn't seemed like something that would engage and command the devotion and be the life-giving center of your entire life.

[1 : 1 9] Well, this fall, we've actually been studying the book of Ecclesiastes. And Ecclesiastes is a book of ancient wisdom that was written thousands of years ago.

But even though it is very old, at the same time, it feels incredibly contemporary. The writer of Ecclesiastes wrestles with some of the most perennial questions and problems of human existence. He's asking the deep questions of life. And a few weeks ago, we started working our way sequentially through this book, passage by passage.

And today, we come to chapter 3, verse 16. You can turn with me there in the Pew Bible. That's page 519. If you're new to the Bible, the big number are the chapters and the small numbers are the verses.

We're going to look at this passage together on page 519 in the Pew Bible. And there are two big questions that Ecclesiastes confronts us with in this section of his book.

[2 : 2 7] This section that starts in chapter 3, verse 16 and runs to the end of chapter 4. And his first question is this. Where do we find real justice?

In a world full of injustice, where can we find real justice? And his second question is, where do we find real comfort?

In a world full of oppression, where can we find real and lasting comfort? So let's look together at what Ecclesiastes has to say as he highlights these questions.

Let's look at the first problem Ecclesiastes confronts. Where can we find real justice? Let me read chapter 3, verses 16 through 22. It says this.

Moreover, I saw under the sun that in the place of justice, even there was wickedness. And in the place of righteousness, even there was wickedness.

[3 : 3 4] I said in my heart, God will judge the righteous and the wicked, for there is a time for every matter and for every work. I said in my heart with regard to the children of man that God is testing them, that they may see that they themselves are but beasts.

For what happens to the children of man and what happens to the beasts is the same. As one dies, so dies the other. They all have the same breath.

And man has no advantage over the beasts, for all is vanity. All go to one place. All are from the dust, dust, and to dust all return.

Who knows whether the spirit of man goes upward and the spirit of the beast goes down into the earth. So I saw that there's nothing better than that a man should rejoice in his work, for this is his lot.

Who can bring him to see what will be after him? So in verse 16, Ecclesiastes highlights the problem. In the place of justice, in the place of righteousness, even there was wickedness. [4 : 47] You know, it's one thing to look kind of at the broader world and to see people not treating each other as they ought to be treated, to see evil and injustice and exploitation, but it's another thing to look specifically at the places where justice and righteousness are meant to be upheld and to see that even there there's wickedness.

To look at the law courts or to look at the police stations or to look at the halls of government, to look at those places where wrongs are supposed to be put right and even there to see the opposite, to see the very same injustice and wickedness at work, to see prejudice and favoritism and partiality, to see bribery and exploitation and self-interest.

to see judges wrongfully convict innocent people, to see crooked police officers and politicians working not for the good of their communities but for their own gain.

In the place of justice, in the place of righteousness, even there was wickedness. And with the writer of Ecclesiastes, don't our hearts just cry out against this?

Doesn't it just cause something to stir up within us? And you know, that heart cry is something that we should all listen to.

[6 : 23] We should listen to that heart cry against the injustice in those places of righteousness. Because when we listen, we start to hear in that moment two very important things.

We are realizing in that heart cry two very important things. First, first thing we realize is that there is such a thing as justice and righteousness.

There is such a thing as right and wrong. There is a moral reality that is bigger and more permanent than my own wants and desires. Some things really are wrong.

Some things really are right no matter who does or who doesn't do them. There is an objective moral reality that we just can't shake as human beings no matter how hard we try to tell ourselves that everything is relative or that your truth is your truth and mine is mine.

There is a very definite sense that there is an objective moral reality in the world. And the reason why that is is because the world and everything in it was created by a good and righteous God.

[7 : 48] the one true God who made all things to flourish and to rejoice and to share in this goodness.

And God made human beings in His own image to worship Him and to rule over creation, to steward creation justly to His glory.

As humans, we have this indelible, undeniable sense that there is an objective moral reality because the world is not an accident but because the world is the creation of an objectively good and righteous God.

In other words, there is a moral law because there is a moral law giver who made all things to relate rightly to Him and then to flourish as a result. But you know, when our heart cries out against injustice, we don't just see evidence that there is a good God who upholds our sense of moral reality.

We also see that the world is not the way it's supposed to be. God made the world good.

[9 : 02] God created humans to love and to worship Him. God made us to be just stewards of creation that we might flourish before Him. But that's not what we see now, is it?

The world's not a place of flourishing but a place of suffering and evil and injustice. Things are not the way they're supposed to be. You see, we might take verse 16 and we might apply it to the whole created order.

In the place of justice, in the place of righteousness, the justice that was supposed to be, the created righteousness that God intended, there's wickedness. What went wrong?

What went wrong is that humans sinned against God. Rather than worship and serve God, we decided to put ourselves in the place of God and to ignore God in the world that God has made. we rejected God's good ways and laws and we became a law unto ourselves. And although God created humans to live before Him, now because of this sin, because of this rupture in our relationship with God, death has entered the world.

[10 : 21] And in verses 18 through 20 of Ecclesiastes, we find the writer making this sober observation that now humans die just like the beasts in the field.

All are from dust and to dust all return. This is the curse of sin upon human life.

Death. And you know, for a moment, Ecclesiastes is unsure whether there's any difference now between humans and beasts.

He says somewhat agnostically in verse 21, who knows whether the spirit of man goes upward and the spirit of the beast goes down into the earth. Now keep in mind that Ecclesiastes is reflecting on human injustice here.

And seeing the pervasive ravages of human evil and injustice, he begins to question whether human sin has allowed any humanity to remain with us.

[11:23] Verse 18, maybe God's just showing us and proving to us that now, because of all this injustice, we're no better off than the animals. Perhaps sin has dehumanized us to such a degree that we are now no different from the beasts who die and return to dust.

Ecclesiastes is grappling with this despairing thought that maybe we've fallen so far that we've utterly lost the image of God in which we were created. Are we any better than the beasts? Ecclesiastes asks. Well, our passage seems to offer two alternative ways forward. And you know, this is the style of this kind of strange and mysterious book of Ecclesiastes in the Old Testament. Ecclesiastes will often juxtapose seemingly contradictory approaches to life and challenge us then to think it through for ourselves. And in challenging us in this way, the book is forcing us to grow in real wisdom.

To not just take what we've been spoon-fed, but to wrestle it out for ourselves anew. So what are the alternatives? Well, on the one hand, perhaps there is no hope for real justice.

[12:46] Perhaps we aren't any better than the beasts. And perhaps the best that we can do in this life is what verse 22 says. So I saw there's nothing better than that a man should rejoice in his work, for that's his lot.

Who can bring him to see what will be after him? Feels a bit like resignation, doesn't it? Maybe we can't do anything about injustice, and maybe we just have to get whatever enjoyment we can out of this life and realize that our futures are unknown.

There are many of us who live that way today, aren't there? But that's not the only alternative.

Earlier in the passage, we read this, I said in my heart, God will judge the righteous and the wicked, for there is a time for every matter and for every work.

Ecclesiastes sees that if there is hope for the world, if there is a prospect for real lasting justice, it has to come from outside of the world.

In other words, human effort alone will not produce it. In fact, we are very much part of the problem. The injustice and evil in the world runs right through our own hearts.

[14:16] You see, verse 16 applies not just to the world as a whole, but it applies to each and every one of us. In the place of righteousness, even there, in my own heart, there was wickedness.

You see, in our own hearts, we know we should strive for justice and righteousness, but even there, we see that our desires are not pure and our actions are not impartial, that we don't love righteousness, that we too are part of the problem.

And so, rescue must come not from us. If there's any hope for the world, God must be the one to judge and to put things right.

You see, as the creator, God doesn't just have the right to judge. He alone has the ability to judge. In fact, God is the judge that we long for.

God alone is good and impartial and righteous. God alone can judge with perfect equity and perfect knowledge.

[15:28] That's why the Psalms repeatedly say that when God, their creator, finally acts to put the world to rights, when God finally steps into his broken creation to put an end to evil and injustice, when God finally makes the world new through his act of redeeming judgment, the psalmists say, the trees will clap their hands and the rivers will sing for joy.

Creation will rejoice when this perfectly good God comes to judge because it will mean the end of evil and injustice and suffering once and for all.

hope. That is the world's only lasting hope. But here's the troubling thing.

When God's perfect judgment comes to judge perfectly and to make all things new, before the bar of this utterly impartial goodness and justice, where will you and I stand?

as sinners, we will stand condemned. And so the question is, is there any hope for us sinners before the good judgment of God?

[16:59] You see, the only hope that we have hope isn't in our own righteousness, for we have none that will avail before the judgment seat of God.

Our only hope isn't in our own righteousness, but in the righteousness of another. The good news of the Bible is this, that God will judge the world and put things right, but he's also made a way for sinners to be safe in that judgment.

Imagine you're walking home from work or you're walking home from class and unexpectedly a great rainstorm appears. I was on campus on Thursday and it was raining and there were a lot of wet people walking around.

Unexpectedly this great rainstorm crops up, the heavy rain begins to fall. What do you do? You immediately run for shelter, right? You find a doorway, you find an awning, you find an alcove, you find some kind of shelter, shelter to keep you safe while the storm passes by.

And friends, you see, God has done just that when he became incarnate in the person of Jesus Christ. Jesus lived the life you and I ought to have lived in perfect righteousness before God the Father.

[18:24] And Jesus Christ died the death that you and I deserve to die. On the cross, he bore the full curse of God's judgment against human sin. And on the third day, Jesus Christ rose from the grave, demonstrating that he was the Son of God, and that he would now be the shelter for all who take refuge in him.

You and I can flee to him, and his perfect righteousness and his sin-bearing death will cover you, you see.

He already endured the storm so that you and I don't have to. Jesus Christ willingly stood in the winds and the rain of judgment.

He willingly allowed that storm to fall hard on himself so that you could be safe beneath him. You see, the only place, the only place where real justice can be found in an unjust world is at the cross of Jesus Christ.

At the cross, God judged human sin. The storms of his wrath fell fully upon human injustice and evil as Jesus Christ became sin for us.

[19:45] And at the cross, God freely offers his righteousness to all who believe. Paul says he was delivered up for our trespasses and he was raised for our justification.

So you see, at the cross, justice and love meet perfectly. Justice because God maintains his righteous opposition to sin and evil, and love because God forgives and receives unjust sinners who repent and trust in his son.

Because Jesus willingly stood in your place, God is both just and the justifier of those who believe in him.

And for those who know God's justifying grace in this way, something happens. For those who take shelter under the love and righteousness of Jesus their Lord, a change begins. Righteousness, we start to become people who love righteousness more and more, and who work for justice more and more.

[21:02] Jesus says that his followers are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness. When you genuinely receive this gift of righteousness, you will become passionate about extending that gift to others.

Having been freely put right with God through the cross of Christ, Christians now seek to go out in the power of the Spirit to restore and put all things right in the name of Christ.

Christ. We hunger and thirst for righteousness in every area of God's world. Where injustice and wickedness dwell, there is a place for God's grace and God's kingdom work to begin.

Just as it has begun in our own hearts when Christ forgave and reconciled us, so we must see that righteousness made visible all around us.

And this means that the Christian's pursuit of justice won't grow dim or wear out or get cynical when things get difficult.

[22:11] This is a great problem, isn't it? It's easy to be passionate for putting things right only within months or years to just grow deeply discouraged and embittered.

But not so for those who have come to know the righteousness of Christ because our hungering and thirsting for righteousness is rooted in an already finished work and in an ultimate hope of His kingdom.

And at the same time, the Christian pursuit of justice doesn't grow proud or self-congratulatory when things go well. Maybe you've been around people like that. They're so in tune with righteousness that they're just completely unbearable to be around, right?

They're just immensely proud and condemning of everyone around them. But for the Christian, that can never be the case. Why? Because we know that no matter how hard we hunger and thirst for righteousness, we are always just sinners saved by sheer grace.

Any advance of God's kingdom and His righteousness is ultimately His work and not ours. So this is Ecclesiastes' first question.

[23 : 28] Where can we find real justice? Friends, the answer is only found in God and supremely in the cross of Jesus Christ where God justifies sinners by His grace, renews them, and sends them out to be agents of His grace in the world.

Ecclesiastes' second question comes in chapter 4. And this time, having reflected on justice, he kind of turns a little bit to a related topic and he asks, where can real comfort be found in the midst of oppression?

Let me read chapter 4 for us. Ecclesiastes says, again, I saw all the oppressions that are done under the sun, and behold, the tears of the oppressed, and they had no one to comfort them.

On the side of their oppressors there was power, and there was no one to comfort them. And I thought the dead who are already dead more fortunate than the living who are still alive.

But better than both is he who has not yet been and has not seen the evil deeds that are done under the sun. Then I saw all the toil and all skill and work come from a man's envy of his neighbor.

[24 : 41] This also is vanity and is striving after wind. The fool folds his hands and eats his own flesh, better a handful of quietness than two hands full of toil and a striving after wind. Again, I saw vanity under the sun.

One person who has no one, either son or brother, and yet there's no end. All his toil and his eyes are never satisfied with riches, so that he never asks, for whom am I toiling and depriving myself of pleasure?

This also is vanity and an unhappy business. Two are better than one because they have a good reward for their toil. For if they fall, one will lift up his fellow.

But woe to him who is alone when he falls and has not another to lift him up. If two lie together, they keep warm, but how can one keep warm alone? And though a man might prevail against one who is alone, two will withstand him.

A threefold cord is not quickly broken. Better was a poor and wise youth than an old and foolish king who no longer knew how to take advice, for he went from prison to the throne, though in his own kingdom he had been poor.

[25 : 49] I saw all the living who move about under the sun along with that youth who was to stand in the king's place. There was no end of all the people, all of whom he led. Yet those who come later will not rejoice in him.

Surely this also is vanity and a striving after wind. Okay, now we don't have time to explore all the details of this chapter. And in fact, we're actually going to return to many of the themes that begin in this chapter in the coming weeks.

As Ecclesiastes proceeds, it's often going to revisit the same ideas as the book goes on. It kind of moves elliptically through the same themes as it progresses. But today, I just want to notice again these opening verses where he says, Behold the tears of the oppressed, and they had no one to comfort them.

On the side of their oppressors there was power, and there was no one to comfort them. Who will comfort the oppressed in this life?

Ecclesiastes asks. But do you see, do you see how the gospel of Jesus Christ opens up a new horizon that Ecclesiastes could not yet see?

[27 : 03] For what does the gospel tell us? It tells us that God himself stood in the place of the oppressed.

Jesus Christ entered into the life of the poor, the downtrodden, the broken hearted. There is no tier of human experience that he himself has not personally understood. He's joined himself to all of our sufferings, all of our sorrows.

So, friend, if you are weary, or you are weeping, or you are oppressed today, you are not alone. Even if you feel that everyone has abandoned you, the Lord Jesus has not.

He is with you in every sorrow and in every tear. And he is there not merely to sympathize with you, but to really comfort you.

Because of what God has done in Jesus Christ, you see, power is no longer ultimately on the side of the oppressors.

[28 : 10] Why? Because God is the only true source of power. God is almighty and sovereign, and the almighty God took on flesh and lived among us. And when he lived among us in the flesh, with whom did he fellowship?

With whom did he live and work? With whom did he unite himself in his cause? His power was not joined to the oppressors of this world, those who worked and toiled just out of envy for their neighbor to get ahead.

No. When the almighty and sovereign God took on flesh and walked among us, he was with the weak and the lowly and the outcast.

God placed himself in his almighty power on behalf of the poor and on behalf of the sorrowful and on behalf of those who mourn. And that means there is coming a day when oppression will cease and oppressors will be called to account.

God will have the last word, and God will stand with his people, and God will see that every tear is wiped from their eyes. And all sorrows, even death itself, will be swallowed up in God's victory on behalf of the oppressed.

[29 : 21] And you see, God has not just promised that one day all oppression will cease. He's also promised that even the afflictions of this life cannot stop his current redemptive work from going forth.

What the world means for evil, God will intend for good. In fact, because of who God is in his power and in his goodness, he has promised that all things work together for good, for those who love him and who are called according to his purpose.

You see, friends, lasting comfort is found in the same place where lasting justice is found. For the sinner, lasting justice can only be found in the cross and resurrection of the Lord Jesus.

For the sufferer, lasting comfort, too, can only be found in the cross and resurrection of the Lord Jesus. You see, his scars are both your justification and your redemption.

They are your righteousness and your freedom. They speak over you his word of forgiveness and his word of protecting love. You are mine and no one will take you out of my hands.

[30 : 38] And in the embrace of his scarred hands in the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ, a new community is forged.

Ecclesiastes 4, 9 through 12 lifts up the power and comfort of relationship, of community. How many people have been to a wedding and you've heard this passage read, right? You're like, oh, this is the one passage in this crazy text I've actually heard before, right?

Because I was at a wedding and they read it. But what's Ecclesiastes really getting on about here, right? He's talking about the power of community, of living not for yourself but with and for others. And this is exactly what the church of Jesus Christ is. It is the fulfillment of verses 9 through 12. All who believe in Jesus Christ become a part of this community, of the church.

We no longer work alone. We no longer rise or fall alone. We no longer face battles or defeats alone. We're woven together in Christ by the Holy Spirit like a threefold cord that can't be broken.

[31 : 46] And this is why baptism isn't just a sign of being united to Jesus in his death and in his resurrection, but being united to all those who have been united to Jesus in his death and resurrection, of being united to the visible church.

And this is why becoming a member of a local church is so important. Because we aren't made to live alone. God rescues us to become a people.

A people who hunger and thirst for righteousness together. A people who together comfort one another in all our afflictions. And that's what this baptism today is all about.

It's about the work of God saving grace, saving us through the death and resurrection of his son, making us new creations in him, and at the same time grafting us into a new family, making us a new people who love and serve not just one another, but who seek to love our neighbors as ourselves.

And God holds this out to all of us today. Friend, you can find his justice and his comfort. You can know that your sins are forgiven.

[33 : 00] You can find your place in his people and be known. Turn from your sins. Trust in Jesus Christ who died and rose again for you.

And you too will find real justice and real comfort. Let's pray together. Amen. Lord, we pray that you would be with us now as we consider these words from Ecclesiastes and as we look at these waters of baptism.

Lord, we see represented here, Father, how you, through your son, bore the weight of human sin and death and rose again so that we might live anew unto you.

God, I ask that this message of saving grace would work in all of our hearts this morning. Lord, for those who are new to spiritual things, would you be opening their eyes to the rich, deep, and good realities of who you are and all that you've done in Christ?

Lord, for those who have been wrestling with you for some time, God, by your spirit, would you break down their defenses? Would you call them by your love? Would you liberate them by your spirit that they might believe in Jesus Christ and be saved?

[34 : 23] And God, for those of us who profess faith in you, along with Hoshua and along with Zeran, would we together be the kind of people that you've called and redeemed us to be, a people of righteousness, a people of comfort, a people who hold high the name of Jesus, our righteousness, and our King.

We pray this in his mighty name. Amen.